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Democractic Savety Valves

The Therapeutic Effects of Antipolitical Referenda

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Democractic Savety Valves

The Therapeutic Effects of Antipolitical Referenda

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Abstract

There has been a recent wave of referenda votes aimed against the governing political class in various western societies. I think it is necessary to go beyond the nostrums of the 1960s or 1970s in explaining these developments. The anti-system character of recent referendum voting and new party formation defies earlier perspectives and hopes. They are far from being driven by the political, economic, and social radicalism of the 1960s. Anti-government, anti-tax, anti-welfare state, and anti-redistributionist sentiments were very much to the fore. The referenda may reflect less the desire for active political participation, in the way that some in the 1960s may have dreamed, than a negative lashing out, a refusal of certain verities or proposals coming from on high, without a clearly worked out alternative vision of politics. But if a significant segment of the population of a liberal democracy feels disempowered and even disenfranchised vis-à-vis the existing political structures; if it questions the legitimacy of the actions of those who rule in its name – is it not better that it have an outlet to express its frustrations through a device such as the referendum?

A first version of this paper was presented at the July 1994 conference *Vienna Dialogue on Democracy* on "The Politics of Antipolitics" which was organized by the Institute for Advanced Studies' Department of Political Science.

Sail, sail thy best, ship of Democracy,
Of value is thy freight, 'tis not the Present only,
The Past is also stored in thee,
Thou holdest not the venture of thyself alone,
not of the Western continent alone,
Earth's *resumé* entire floats on thy keel
O ship, is steadied by thy spars."

(Walt Whitman, *Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood*, 4)

There has been a recent wave of referenda votes aimed against the governing political class in various western societies. The 50.7% vote against Maastricht in Denmark in June, 1992 was followed by a 49% vote against the treaty in France in September 1992; Swiss voters, defying their political elites, chose to oppose any closer links with the European Community in December of that year. In Canada, close to 55% of the electorate voted against the Charlottetown constitutional accord in October 1992, despite the fact that the latter was supported by the three major federal political parties of the day and by all the provincial premiers. In Italy, the referenda of April, 1993 saw a whopping 82% of the electorate vote for sweeping changes to the Italian electoral system, and support a series of other systemic changes to the governance of the country.

The same wave of anti-establishment referendum sentiment was accompanied by the rise of populist movements and parties, critical of the entire political establishment of their societies. Many of these movements were on the political right, including the Northern League in Italy, the Reform Party in Canada, and, in large part, the Perot support groups in the United States in 1992. Yet not all anti-establishment sentiment necessarily came from the right.

At one level, the phenomena we have been experiencing can appear threatening to the very temper of liberal democratic society. For the post-war consensus was based upon general agreement about the rules of the game, the relative convergence of political parties around major political issues, the routinization of electoral politics along predictable lines. True, there had been explosions such as the student movements in the United States, France, and the Federal Republic of Germany that suggested that all was not necessarily well in the post-war liberal democratic world. These movements had attempted to challenge dominant political assumptions:

“In a participatory democracy, political life would be based on several root principles: that decision-making of basic social consequence be carried on by public groupings; that politics has the function of bringing people out of isolation into community.”¹

“It is because the movement has developed outside of Parliament that it has been able to force the power of capital to retreat.”²

But despite the dismay of defenders of the established mode of western politics about overload and ungovernability,³ the competing elite model of politics derived from Joseph Schumpeter came through the wave of 1960s protest pretty well intact.

The turn to the right in societies like Great Britain or the United States by the end of the 1970s did not come about through any significant change to the prevailing party systems. Nor did the accession to power of parties of the moderate left in countries like Spain, France, or Greece in the early 1980s push politics beyond the boundaries of competitive struggle for the people's vote and democratic alternation in power.

So how then does one explain the curious distrust of political elites that began to surface by the beginning of the 1990s? Why the discrediting

¹ Students for a Democratic Society, *The Port Huron Statement*, reprinted in H. B. McCullough, ed., *Political Ideologies and Political Philosophies*, (Toronto:Wall & Thomson, 1989), 163–4.

² Alain Schnapp & Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *La Commune Etudiante*, (Paris:Seuil, 1969), 501, my translation.

³ Michel Crozier et al., *The Crisis of Democracy*, (New York:New York University Press, 1975), published for the Trilateral Commission.

of politicians and of much of the political class, not only in Italy, but in a good number of other western societies as well?

“For the first time in the European Community 12 level, a clear majority are more dissatisfied (52%) than satisfied (45%) with the way democracy works in their country....Majorities are unhappy in Italy, Greece, Spain, and France.”⁴

What were the fault-lines that seemed to run so deep between governors and governed, even as the triumph of democracy was being celebrated in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and parts of East Asia? What was the meaning of the so-called democratic deficit that had crept into our collective public lives?

If one begins with a more classical definition of democracy, e.g. the direct rule of the people of the Athenian model or the version of popular sovereignty dear to Rousseau, there is, of course, less of a paradox in what we have been experiencing. Democracy of the ancients was characterized by a significant degree of citizen participation when compared to the modern.

“Striking is the extent to which more modest citizens could, and for the mere operation of democratic institutions needed to, participate in public life....Athenians were inclined to limit any dependence on ‘experts’”.⁵

To the degree that contemporary representative structures and political parties fall short of allowing for the measure of *isonomia* (equal political rights) or *isegoria* (equal right to address the political assembly) that face to face societies like Athens with its assembly and council and frequent rotation in office engendered,⁶ it might be argued that our political system was due for a shake-up. To the degree that the sovereign people said no to its betters, was it not doing exactly as Rousseau suggested fell within its rights?⁷ And one could make reference to a whole wave of literature on participatory democracy⁸ or to various movements of recent decades – the peace movement, the student movement, feminism, environmentalism – that elaborated a bottom-up, grass-roots approach to politics. For example,

“Environmentalism has always attached central importance to the development of innovative and participative administrative and political institutions. The concern is at the core of the strong environmental emphasis on decentralization.”⁹

⁴ *Eurobarometer*, #38, (Brussels: Commission of the European Communities) Dec., 1992, 71.

⁵ R.K. Sinclair, *Democracy and Participation in Athens*, (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1988), 75.

⁶ Cf. the discussion in Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*, (Oxford:Blackwell, 1991), chapter 4.

⁷ “Does it please the people to maintain the present form of government?” Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Book III, chap. 18, (Harmondsworth:Penguin, 1968), 148.

⁸ Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1970); C.B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1977); Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversarial Democracy*, (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1983); Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, (Berkeley:University of California Press, 1984.)

⁹ Robert Paehlke, *Environmentalism and the Future of Progressive Politics*, (New Haven:Yale University Press, 1989), 278.

As someone who came of political age with this participatory tradition,¹⁰ I find it has a familiar ring.

Nonetheless, I think it is necessary to go beyond the nostrums of the 1960s or 1970s in explaining the developments of recent years. Firstly, the anti-system character of recent referendum voting and new party formation defies earlier perspectives and hopes. It is not necessarily the post-materialist tenets that Inglehardt had highlighted, e.g. more say on the job, less economic growth, less emphasis on fighting crime or maintaining order,¹¹ that underlie the most recent anti-system votes. One need but examine the tenets of movements like the Reform Party, the Northern League, or of Perot's supporters to see how little these are driven by the political, economic, and social radicalism of the 1960s. Anti-government, anti-tax, anti-welfare state, and anti-redistributionist sentiments were very much to the fore.

"The unlimited appetite of the welfare state for funding has led to unprecedented tax grabs."¹²

"There is widespread feeling in Lombardy and the North generally of being bled in order to support the Roman parasitic bureaucracy and the Mezzogiorno waste."¹³

Secondly, this referendum *cum* electoral behaviour may reflect less the desire for active political participation, in the way that some in the 1960s may have dreamed, than a negative lashing out, a refusal of certain verities or proposals coming from on high, without a clearly worked out alternative vision of politics. True, in instances such as the Canadian Reform Party, notions of citizen initiative and of the right to recall unpopular elected officials received widespread support, as did the questioning of the hard and fast character of party alignment and voting in legislative bodies.

"We need freer votes in the federal Parliament, and greater use of referenda to secure public input on major issues, such as is provided by legislation in Switzerland, Australia, and the United States."¹⁴

But positions such as these stop short of a more pro-active vision of what citizen politics might be about. In other words, there is less inclination to develop extensive models of direct democracy for our day than to allow the citizenry a checking role on the elected political class.

Thirdly, we would be foolish to examine the anti-political trends of the 1990s without paying close attention to the rather different circumstances western societies find themselves in when compared to thirty years before. The economic crisis which was to end the thirty golden years of postwar boom has changed the bases of the world in which we operate. Globalization, a

¹⁰ Cf. my *Parliament vs. People*, (Vancouver:New Star,1984) or *The Masks of Proteus: Canadian Reflections on the State*, (Montreal:McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), chap. 5.

¹¹ Ronald Inglehardt, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*, (Princeton:Princeton University Press, 1990), 136.

¹² Stephen Harper, Reform Party adviser (and now M.P.), *Act of Faith*, Vancouver:B.C. Report Books, 1991), 180.

¹³ Raimondo Strassoldo, "Globalism and Localism: Theoretical Reflections and Some Evidence," in Zdravko Mlinar, ed., *Globalization and Territorial Identities*, (Aldershot:Avebury, 1991), 50.

¹⁴ "A Vision Refined: Preston Manning's 1990 Speech for Eastern Canadians," in *Act of Faith*, BC Report Magazine Books:Vancouver, 1991, 178.

new international division of labour, rapid technological innovation, deindustrialization in various countries of the north, are some of its operative terms. As the authors of a recent study on globalization argue:

“Leaders of nation-states are losing much of the control over their own territory they once had. More and more, they must conform to the demands of the outside world because the outsiders are already inside the gates....The shifting relationships between the managers of global corporations and political authorities are creating a new political reality almost everywhere....The modern nation looks more and more like an institution of a bygone age.”¹⁵

Such developments have brought a sense of uncertainty and *angst* to many of the citizens of western societies.

We live in an age of rapid ideological meltdown and political and economic transformations. Post-fordism is the term that the regulation school uses to describe western economies;¹⁶ post-modernism has become the banner of the cultural avant-garde; post-communism and post-Cold War has become the frame of reference of statesmen and journalists alike.

These changes have been accompanied by other transformations – trans-national trading blocs like the European Community, the North American Free Trade Agreement, and potentially the Asia Pacific region; south-north immigration flows; the return of ethnic nationalism in central and eastern Europe and beyond. The world is a complicated, in some ways frightening, place and some of the anti-political voting we are seeing is without doubt a reaction to it. Moreover, some of the forms this can take do harbour real risks for democratic tolerance, pluralism, and the like.

“With 1990 the Lombard League unleashed what has now become its battlecry: the rejection of uncontrolled immigration.”¹⁷

“The National Front relates these terms (immigration, unemployment and lack of safety) and at the same time presents itself as the only entity able to solve *the* problem.”¹⁸

Yet this is not reason enough to despair of the turn to anti-political politics. My own position on the phenomenon we have been witnessing is rooted in a version of democratic theory that is not so easily swayed by ideological likes and dislikes. If one takes the theory of classical democracy seriously, or even semi-seriously, one cannot simply lash out at democratic electorates for seizing the opportunities that have been given them to censure their political elites. The lines from Brecht regarding the Communist Party and the working class in the aftermath of the East Berlin uprising of 1953 come to mind:

¹⁵ Richard J. Barnet and John Cavanagh, *Global Dreams: Imperial Corporations and the New World Order*, (New York:Simon and Schuster, 1994), 19.

¹⁶ Cf. Robert Boyer, *The Theory of Regulation: A Critical Analysis*, (New York:Columbia University Press, 1990.)

¹⁷ Daniele Vimercati, *I Lombardi alla Nuova Crociata*, cited in Roberto Biorcio, “The Rebirth of Populism in Italy and France,” *Telos* #90, Winter 1991–2, 53.

¹⁸ Birgitta Orfali, *L’Adhésion au Front National*, cited in Biorcio, op. cit., 50.

“Wouldn’t it be easier for the government to dissolve the people and elect a new one?”¹⁹

There is nothing necessarily left or right about referendum voting; so much the experience of a number of western societies would suggest.²⁰ Whether publics in the end support or oppose government proposals, e.g. membership in the European Community in Norway in 1972 or in the U.K. in 1975, Maastricht in the 1992 and 1993 referenda, Charlottetown in the 1992 Canadian case, one of the more striking things about referendum votes is that they mobilize significant sections of the population who may have lost faith in traditional party politics. They may also lead to *de facto* coalitions of a quite interesting sort that cross traditional political lines.

On the one hand, one often finds the establishments of mainstream political parties coalescing behind a particular initiative.

“The left has learned to vote for some laws of the right and vice-versa. Decoupling [of issues from party allegiance] is the abc of civilized politics.”²¹

This helps to temper the usual lines of partisan division, highlighting commonalities about basic institutions or relations with the outside world which are useful antidotes to the adversarial politics of liberal democracy. For we need to go beyond the friend-enemy distinction that Carl Schmitt outlined in his theory of politics in the 1920s if we are to maintain overarching democratic consensus.²²

The legacy of Weimar Germany and of other polarized societies, e.g. Spain 1931–6,²³ various Latin American countries in the 1950s and 1960s, is there to remind us of the dangers. Something of a cottage industry on the transition to democracy and on the need for ideological flexibility on the part of old opponents has sprung up to address this.²⁴

On the other hand, one finds quite interesting coalitions on the “No” side in referendum battles that put into the same camp individuals and movements that would not normally be on speaking terms with one another. One thinks of the right of the Conservative Party and the left of the Labour Party in the case of the 1975 British referendum on membership in the European Community²⁵. One thinks of the rights and lefts that opposed Maastricht in Denmark or in France.

¹⁹ Bertold Brecht, “Die Lösung,” in *Gedichte VII*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1964), my translation.

²⁰ Cf., for example, Thomas Cronin, *Direct Democracy: The Politics of Initiative, Referendum, and Recall*, (Cambridge:Harvard University Press, 1989).

²¹ Olivier Duhamel, *Le Monde*, Sept. 2, 1992, 2.

²² Cf. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1976.)

²³ Cf. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, eds., *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, (Baltimore:Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.)

²⁴ Cf. Guillermo O’Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, & Lawrence Whitehead, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, (Baltimore:Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Guiseppe Di Palma, *To Craft Democracies: An Essay on Democratic Transitions*, (Berkeley:University of California Press, 1990).

²⁵ David Butler and Uwe Kitzinger, *The 1975 Referendum*, (London: Macmillan, 1975); Anthony King, *Britain Says Yes: The 1975 Referendum on the Common Market*, (Washington:American Enterprise Institute, 1977).

“Only the ultra-liberal Progressive Party and the Socialist People’s Party advocated a No vote [in Denmark]....A substantial part of the No vote came from a group of neo-nationalists. Some of these are strongly xenophobic, some even racist....But the majority of No votes came from those who receive some sort of state benefit or support....More than 60 per cent of [Social Democratic] voters failed to follow the Yes recommendation from the party leadership...Similarly, a majority of trades-union members rejected the argument for a Yes vote put forward by their national leaders.”²⁶

“The populist talents on the No side [included]....Philippe de Villiers....an extreme nationalist from the staunchly catholic conservative West....More cerebral and less right wing, if staunchly nationalist, was Philippe Séguin, who focused on the treaty, on its technocratic implications....Beyond the ranks of the UDF and RPR figures...was [Jean-Marie] Le Pen....The left-wing of the No campaign comprised the CP, trotskyists, and [Jean Pierre] Chevènement. The Communists concentrated on Maastricht as the Europe of bankers and multinationals....Chevènement denounced Maastricht as a masochistic, deflationary proposal.”²⁷

One thinks of the right-wing populists of a Reform persuasion in English Canada and the liberal-left opponents of Charlottetown such as the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, concerned about the weakening of the powers of the federal government or of the Charter of Rights. One thinks of the even broader coalitions of voters who rocked Italian politics with their overwhelmingly anti-system votes in the April, 1993 referenda.

Not that such opponents see eye to eye. They constitute rainbow coalitions of the oddest sort. But the mere process of finding oneself in the same TV studios, or on the same platforms, or on the same side of the newspaper page has a moderating effect on the cleavages that characterize the politics of everyday. This helps dilute some of the ideological passions – not necessarily a bad thing in a liberal democracy. It may even allay linguistic and cultural divisions in a multinational federation such as Canada. It was certainly better, for example, that Charlottetown was rejected both in Quebec and by a majority of English Canadian provinces, than by only one or the other.

One can further contrast the rigidity of party allegiance in representative-type democracies with the autonomy of the individual citizen-voter that derives from republican/democratic theory. A few comments from ordinary Canadians speaking to the government-appointed Citizens’ Forum on Canada’s Future in 1991 may here be symptomatic of a more widespread current in our day:

“The opinions and comments of individuals concerning ‘their’ country and its future should be considered. It is time the individual becomes actively involved in the future of Canada and not leave it to the politicians!”

²⁶ Niels Finn Christiansen, “The Danish No to Maastricht,” *New Left Review*, Sept.–Oct., 1992, #195, 98–9.

²⁷ Byron Criddle, “The French Referendum on the Maastricht Treaty, Sept., 1992,” *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 46, #2, April, 1993, 232–3.

“Citizen-initiated referenda to make Members of Parliament accountable to their constituents would be an excellent check on extravagances.”

“Canadians seek more than just a stable government and a buoyant economy; they desire a more adequate democracy. Canadians desire a democracy which allows greater participation.”²⁸

Pertinent too are the comments of an American observer:

“If democracy has lost any accountability to the governed, it is because there is no longer any reliable linkage between citizens and those who hold power.”²⁹

I would argue that it is therapeutic to rebuild some of these missing linkages through referenda. It is therapeutic to undo some of the demonization of the “other” that too easily comes to characterize western party politics, by *de facto* making temporary allies out of old opponents and opponents out of old allies. It is therapeutic, from time to time, to allow the people to check the proposals of their rulers (or of the technocrats who advise their rulers), or to at least vent their discontent, especially when traditional political parties have failed them.

Survey data from the 1992 Canadian referendum, for example, show that 56.6% of respondents who defined themselves as on the political left, 61.9% of those on the political right, and 58.2% of those in the political centre intended to vote against Charlottetown – a result that cuts across traditional political allegiances. The same data show that 53.7% of No voters felt that people like themselves had little or no say over what government does compared to only 29.9% of Yes voters who voiced such sentiments; and that those with only high school education or less were far more likely to vote No (approximately 65% of respondents) than those with university education (46.8% of respondents). These last figures illustrate the level of political disillusionment among sections of society that do not identify with political elites.³⁰

I, therefore, have great difficulty with the sort of argument that Giovanni Sartori makes in opposition to the referendum experience.

“Referendum democracy...sets up an outright *zero-sum mechanism* of decision-making....On each issue, the winning majority takes all, the minority loses all....Since every referendum-type decision is a deliberate and self-contained decision, it cannot be tempered by ‘exchanges,’ by cross-issue adjustments or corrections....In short, the objection is that referendum democracy is a conflict maximizing

²⁸ Citizens’ Forum on the Future of Canada, *Report to the People of Canada*, Ottawa, 1991, 105, 106.

²⁹ William Greider, *Who Will Tell the People: The Betrayal of American Democracy*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 20.

³⁰ These data come from the 1992–3 Canadian Elections study and were kindly provided me by Richard Johnston, Political Science, UBC, principal co-author of a forthcoming study on the 1992 referendum to be published by McGill-Queen’s University Press. Cf. also Richard Johnston et al., “The People and the Charlottetown Accord,” in Ron Watts and Douglas Brown, eds., *Canada: The State of the Federation 1993*, (Kingston:Institute of Intergovernmental Relations, 1993), 19–43.

structure...the most unintelligent incarnation of a systematic 'majority tyranny'".³¹

If a significant segment of the population of a liberal democracy feels disempowered and even disenfranchised vis-à-vis the existing political structures; if it feels that larger economic, institutional, or social forces are passing it by; if it questions the legitimacy of the actions of those who rule in its name – is it not better that it have an outlet to express its frustrations through a device such as the referendum? Does one really need to wait for anger to erupt in the streets, or to take the form of extra-parliamentary opposition that threatens to erode the very foundations of a regime?

There is a paradox whereby would-be defenders of liberal democracy like Sartori may, in fact, through their standpat attitudes on issues like referenda be doing their cause more harm than good. And, by the same token, the adherents of more radical forms of democracy, be they on the right or on the left, may through the pursuit of referendum-style solutions to key political questions be providing the western political system with necessary safety valves.

One does not need to be a committed Rousseauian to adopt such a position. On more pragmatic lines, as well, there is a case for introducing an ultimate democratic check onto how rulers behave – not only through periodic elections – but through more episodic referenda. If we believe that power ought to check power, as Montesquieu argued,³² then the competing elite model may fail on important occasions, e.g. major constitutional reform, the forging of transnational institutions, to adequately reflect the *vox populi*. The problem may be particularly acute in parliamentary type systems of the British sort, especially when a party enjoys a comfortable majority in Parliament for a four or five year period; but presidential systems with weak legislative branches, as is the case in a number of Latin American countries, may also experience democratic deficits.³³ Nor does the solution necessarily lie in turning to judicial authority to check executive or legislative power, especially not in highly charged political matters. "The juridical model of politics...preempts democratic contestation," as Jean Elshtain notes.³⁴ The people in a democracy have every reason to wish to check (or at least very carefully scrutinize) their elected politicians on important occasions. Here, liberal democratic theory can only profit from bringing the people back in.

Norberto Bobbio recognizes the need for an economic usage of referenda and for great care in the framing of referendum questions.³⁵ Any one who reflects on the possible abuse of referenda in the past, both in its plebiscitarian form, e.g. the two Napoleons, but also in certain American states, e.g. the California model, cannot but concur. Yet Bobbio's own Italy, one might argue, may well become a more robust democracy because of the meltdown of the political system that the recent referenda helped to bring about. The Maastricht referenda have certainly served notice to the

³¹ Giovanni Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited*, Chatham House:Chatham, N.J., 1987, 115.

³² Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Book XI, chap. 4.

³³ Cf. the interesting discussion of the Latin American problem with strong presidents in Guillermo O'Donnell, "Delegative Democracy," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 5, #1, Jan., 1994, 55–69.

³⁴ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial*, (Toronto:Anansi, 1993), 26.

³⁵ "As for the referendum, which is the only mechanism of direct democracy which can be applied concretely and effectively in most advanced democracies, this is an extraordinary expedient suited only for extraordinary circumstances." Norberto Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy*, Cambridge:Polity Press, 1987, 54.

Eurocrats in Brussels and to politicians in different national capitals to not allow the process of integration to be pushed more rapidly than national public opinions can comfortably accept and to acknowledge the diversity on which European unity must be built. And Charlottetown has brought home certain lessons about the ineluctability of divergent national identities within a multinational federation that constitutional tinkering by itself cannot allay. Canadian political discourse in coming years may be the richer for it.

All of this does not mean that the democratic deficit to which many pointed in recent years will miraculously disappear through a carefully regulated dose of referendum politics. The deeper discontents about modernity, about vanishing community, about the pace and nature of economic and social change will not disappear because of anti-political referenda. As Charles Taylor acutely observes:

“The principal challenge to contemporary Western liberal societies like our own seems to concern their nature as citizen republics. More broadly, we might say that the ‘community’ dimension of modern life, both family and state, are under threat....[T]he functions of government tend to be both more bureaucratically rigid and more distant from the citizenry....[T]he decline of local communities undermine citizen identification and strengthen atomistic self-understanding.”³⁶

There will continue to be varying forms of political alienation, now and into the future, even if the citizen-voter occasionally gets to express her discontents directly. And there is always the risk that political demagogues may prove the ultimate beneficiaries of insurgent forms of politics. Still, I am not prepared to forego ultimate faith in the sagacity of the people. Our political systems evolve, precisely because of challenges of the sort that referendum politics pose. At pivotal moments, referenda symbolize a cross-roads in the life of a polity. New political parties may come to the fore, e.g. Reform and the Bloc Québécois in Canada, Forza Italia and the Party of the Left in Italy. New governments may be voted in – the Liberals in Canada, the RPR-UDF coalition in France, Forza Italia in Italy – to replace tarnished and unpopular administrations.

Back in 1787, following Shay’s rebellion in western Massachusetts, Thomas Jefferson wrote:

“God forbid we should ever be twenty years without such a rebellion....What country before, ever existed a century and a half without a rebellion? And what country can preserve its liberties, if its rulers are not warned from time to time, that the people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms.”³⁷

This may still be true in various parts of the world, where the transition to democracy or its consolidation can be secured by no other means. But in the western world as a whole, we may, by trial and error, have replaced rebellion with referenda as the means of bringing governments and political elites to heel. So two cheers for referendum politics and for the deeper lessons they convey for democratic practice at the end of the twentieth century.

³⁶ Charles Taylor, *Reconciling the Solitudes: Essays on Canadian Federalism and Nationalism*, (Montreal:McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), 88–9.

³⁷ Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Colonel Smith, Nov. 13, 1787, in Adrienne Koch & William Peden, eds., *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, (New York:The Modern Library, 1944), 436.